

Spring 2015

Preparing for a spill: Be ready to assist!

By Cheryl Reardon, ANJEC South Jersey Bayshore Project Director

On the evening of November 26, 2004 (the day after Thanksgiving), the Delaware River suffered a catastrophic assault when the Greek tanker Athos I came into contact with large submerged objects that tore open its single hull as it maneuvered into dock in Paulsboro, NJ. About 300,000 gallons of Venezuelan crude oil gushed from its breached hull and quickly covered the river and everything in its path... very sensitive habitats that host enormous concentrations of shorebirds, waterfowl, fish, hawks, eagles, and other wildlife and wetland habitats were coated and contaminated by the thick oil.

The spill spread from Artificial Island (Salem Co) to North of Petty's Island (Camden Co) and affected 115 miles of river, 280 miles of shoreline and over 16,000 birds, as well as the Delaware River's fish, shellfish, wildlife, and many of its important habitats. The spill will continue to indirectly impact this critical estuary for decades.

The Delaware River and Bay, like most estuaries, supports many forms of commerce and recreation. Yet just one commercial activity, the transport of oil, through a singular mistake or accident can potentially threaten all other interests including the public drinking water supply.

The Delaware River shoreline has six major petroleum refineries that process nearly a million barrels of crude oil per day, as well as other chemicals associated with the refining process, producing 70 percent of the Northeast's oil and gasoline. Collectively, the Ports of Philadelphia, South Jersey and Wilmington, DE, combine to be the largest general cargo port complex in the nation. This volume of traffic sets the stage for environmental accidents of catastrophic proportions. The intensity of oil traffic is expected to increase during this decade and beyond, with the risk of a major vessel collision expected to rise greatly.*

Big spills on the Delaware

The famous American historian Arthur Schlesinger accurately observed that, "history has an eerie way of repeating itself." The Delaware River Estuary has been home to many an oil spill... and probably many more yet to come as evidenced by some spills in recent history:

January 1990: An Exxon underwater pipeline ruptured and released 567,000 gallons of No. 2 fuel oil into the Arthur Kill. The leak occurred from a 5-foot gash in the 12-inch pipeline that connects the Bayway Refinery at Linden to the Bayonne Plant. The spill occurred near the New Jersey coast, but tides and winds moved the oil to the three islands in the Kill and the Staten Island coastline.

(continued)

March 1990: 240,000 gallons of oil spilled from a barge into the Kill van Kull between Bayonne and Staten Island, closing the waterway and blocking ships from Port Newark.

June 1990: 260,000 gallons of oil spilled into New York Harbor from a ruptured tanker docking in Bayonne.

May 1996: The 846-foot T/V Anitra released 42,000 gallons of oil into Big Stone Anchorage, Delaware Bay. Over 50 miles of beaches were oiled over a 2-week period.

January 2012: A malfunctioning fuel pump gasket for a diesel storage tank spilled 26,000 gallons of diesel fuel into Grenloch Lake and surrounding waterways, including Big Timber Creek and the Delaware River.

As this issue of the ANJEC Report was in production, authorities were investigating an oil spill near Pennsville, the second on the Delaware River in just a week's time.

Lessons learned

Important lessons learned from dealing with past spills provide a real opportunity to make fundamental improvements in preparedness, emergency response, data collection, clean-up, and monitoring.

The Delaware Riverkeeper Network worked with the NJ Watershed Watch Network to develop its Oil Spill Toolkit to help local watershed groups, environmental commissions and community volunteers effectively monitor and respond to oil spills that may threaten the health of waterways, communities and the environment. (www.delawareriverkeeper.org/river-action/dr_swat_oil_spill_toolkit.pdf)

This Toolkit offers a starting point for citizens and environmentalists to become familiar with available resources and contacts, and to identify what information to report. For example, here are some of the critical facts to have in hand when reporting a pollution incident:

- your name and contact information
- name and address of responsible party (if known)
- exact location of incident (crossroads and landmarks)
- date and time of incident
- source and cause of the released pollutant (if known)
- any dangers or threats
- any injuries
- photos (include date of photo)
- request return call update.

When reporting a spill, identify your affiliation (i.e. member of an environmental commission or other organization) and let them know who else has been alerted.

ERI a valuable tool

Environmental commissions should be prepared to use the factual information contained in their Environmental Resource Inventory (ERI) to identify environmental and community resources that could be in jeopardy in the area of a spill or where it might spread. Using the ERI as a guide, the commission can coordinate information to report dangers and threats to human population, waterways, habitat, wildlife and drinking water. This information can assist federal, state and local emergency response professionals with directing community volunteers to appropriate locations, saving precious time and resources.

(continued)

Environmental commissions can gather volunteers and citizens concerned about the health of their river, environment and community, who can help gather information to help determine the areas in the most immediate need of protective measures (such as booms), as well as areas where protective measures are failing and in need of repair. Response to environmental emergencies is complex and is often spread across the federal, state and local sectors involving the environmental, emergency management, public safety and public health agencies of all three.

When a catastrophic spill happens, there is an important role for Environmental Commissions to play in the response to, and documentation of, the spill. Trained citizen monitors can have a huge impact in identifying when and where protective measures and/or clean-ups are needed, as well as documenting clean-up progress in the weeks, months and years that follow.